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CONNECTICUT GRAVESTONES
III

By Ernest Caulfield, M.D.

Fig. 1

In one respect Ebenezer Drake was the most interesting of all Connecticut stone engravers. Whenever one of these colonial craftsmen made a design that pleased his fancy he usually continued to use that design, frequently with minor variations, for long periods if not throughout the remainder of his active life. But not Ebenezer Drake. Constantly critical of his own handiwork he so frequently and drastically altered his style that without convincing collateral evidence it would be difficult to believe that so many different types of gravestones were made by the same man. Behind this self-criticism was a volatile artistic temperament and though gravestones even in his time were not usually considered as the proper medium for bold experiments Drake enjoyed the satisfaction of having his adventurous and imaginative creations generally accepted. For descriptive purposes his stones may be roughly separated into groups although the gradual evolution of certain characteristics may be easily traced from stone to stone.

Fig. 2

The earliest stone that can be definitely attributed to Drake is the one in South Windsor for Abiel Grant, cabinet-maker (Fig. 2), who died in 1762. The administrators of this estate entered in their accounts: "To Cash p[d] Eben[r] Drake for Tomb Stones . . . £2-10-0." The feature of this stone that first attracts the eye is the moon-like face which is remarkably expressive for having been made with so few lines, all of them drawn with a compass. Many stonecutters used the compass in designing gravestones, but few with more apparent satisfaction than Ebenezer Drake in his early days. Although the face (or skull) on Grant's stone is not a perfect circle it is very close to one, and the eyes and brows are certainly arcs of a circle. Moreover, the compass had to be moved only a very small distance to make another arc for the turned-up mouth.

There are many "compass" stones similar to Grant's in Windsor and South Windsor, a few of them bearing dates in the 1750s. Despite the dates all of these stones were probably carved in the 1760s because, from the standpoint of both design and lettering, the earliest stone made by Drake was, I believe, that for Sarah Stedman, dated 1762 (Fig. 3). More than any other of his stones this bears the earmarks of an inexperienced novice—Drake was about twenty-three years old when it was made. The mouths and noses on many of these early stones (Fig. 4) appear as straight lines instead of arcs and the borders vary considerably yet "compass" eyes and brows are obvious on all. As time went on, Drake's faces became more shapely although he continued to make good use of his compass until about 1775. When he made any finial design at all on his early stones he used a four-leaved clover probably because that was easier to make with a compass than a multifoliate rose. Also, on his early stones he usually imitated

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

another stonecutter who was popular in East Windsor in the 1760s by cutting five misplaced teeth below each chin.

If Sarah Stedman's gravestone was the first to be made by Drake it is interesting to note the evolution in his lettering from this crude beginning. On this early stone the a's in "Sarah" are backward but elsewhere they are normal; and there are also noticeable deviations in the letters f, g, o and y. Within a very short time, however, there was a striking improvement in his lettering so that by 1770 it was very good, although the hypercritical may still find an occasional error in spelling or in spacing as late as the 1790s. After 1770, for some peculiar reason, Drake always carved the word *who* in italics.

The drape-like wings on Abiel Grant's stone reveal another feature that is helpful in distinguishing Ebenezer's stones. From these simple drapes he went on to wavy lines and intricate ornamentation as he became more and more skillful with his chisel. Indeed, he loved to display this extraordinary skill so much that it is difficult to find one of his stones without numerous wavy lines or elaborate decorations (Fig. 5). From the borders alone, therefore, it is safe to attribute to Drake the double "froglet" stone for the Loomis boys, Giles and Joel (Fig. 6), who "did" in South Windsor, one in 1751 and the other in 1765.

It apparently took Drake a few years before he created a border to his liking. Some of his early stones have no borders or some sort of vine growing upside down. Then, after experimenting with various designs, he developed a border with a distinct geometric appearance which he obviously admired greatly for he used it on so many of his stones. These might be called his "geometric border" stones. The simplest form of this design, seen on the Abiel Grant stone, consists essentially of a climbing vine with a stalk, which in view of Drake's love of curves, is strangely unreal and angular. Each large space was filled with a broad double leaf of a formal, unnatural appearance. By varying the number of double leaves, decorating each with

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

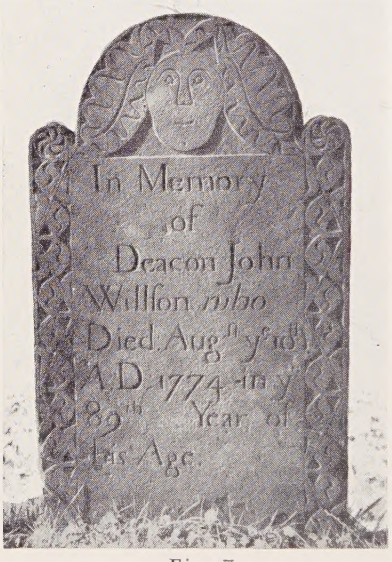

Fig. 7

a short curved line, and by avoiding empty spaces Drake was able to vary the complexity of these borders, yet they all have the appearance of geometric fretwork rather than that of graceful growing vines. The simplified form appears on most of the stones made in the 1760s, and reaches its most complex appearance in the 1770s (Fig. 7). During the 1780s Drake temporarily neglected this motif but returned to it in the 1790s. On all of these "geometric border" stones he carved a pinwheel in the finial. Occasionally he made a double border and a double pinwheel.

Many of Drake's faces are also notable for the pains he took in making life-like eyes. Since heads on gravestones were originally intended as skulls, this attempt to make fetching eyes was carrying things a little far. Nevertheless, Drake seemed to take great pride in his ability to make such eyes. One of the earliest and best examples is the face on the stone for Kezia Elsworth (Windsor, 1762) (Fig. 8), a stone which is otherwise true to type for that period, including the winsome double chin. Thereafter, even on very small stones with little crude faces, Drake seldom failed to cut at least a few marks to represent both inner and outer canthi at the juncture of the lids (Fig. 9).

It was essentially this uninhibited desire to carve expressive eyes and

extravagant ornamentation that led Drake to design some of the most ludicrous gravestones in all New England. After chipping away stone from above and below the eyes he was left with large hideous noses and pouting mouths. Sometimes, as on the stone for Ruth Mather (Windsor, 1791) (Fig. 1), he spent many days making the extraordinarily elaborate wings and crown, but at other times, as on the stone for John Allyn (Windsor, 1796) (Fig. 10), he made the same scare-crow face but with simple, undecorated wings. On a great many other stones, such as that for John Bliss (South Windsor, 1780) (Fig. 11), Drake carved a thick rope-like border to frame the face which only made it still more hideous. By this time his imagination was on the loose and he didn't know where to stop. But on all of these "monkey" stones he carved an incongruous dimple in the chin which was apparently his trade-mark for no other stonecutter added this extra-gentle touch.

Fig. 8

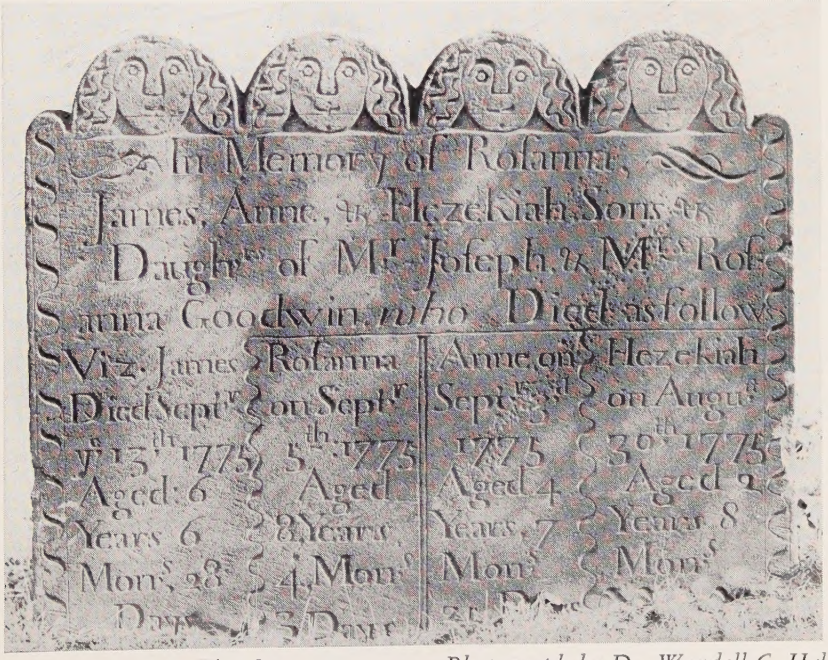

Fig. 9 *Photograph by Dr. Wendell C. Hall*

Fig. 10

Fig. 11

Inasmuch as Drake changed his style so frequently it is probably safe to attribute to him the "mustache" stones which are commonly found in the same graveyards where his other stones prevail. If he did not make these stones at least they show his influence to a marked degree. An unusual example of this type is the stone for Deacon Matthew Rockwell (South Windsor, 1782) (Fig. 12) with its communion service prominently displayed. There is a similar stone in Tolland. Drake continued to assert his artistic independence until about 1800 when, his age having crept up on him, he finally succumbed to the more conservative gravestone fashion of the day with its common willow-and-urn design.

John Keith's manuscript account book in the Society's collection mentions an Ebenezer Drake living "w[t] Erastus Woolcott att [East] Windsor" in June, 1754, an Ebenezer Drake "of Wintonbury" in 1757, and an Ebenezer Drake "of Torrington" in 1759. The first of these was unquestionably the stonecutter because Windsor estates frequently disclose that the gravestones were quarried east of the river. Thus, the estate of Amos Filley (Windsor, 1785) paid Ebenezer Drake not only for the gravestones but also "for ferryages when sd Stones were brought over." According to Gay's history of the Drake family this Ebenezer was born June 12, 1739, the son of Deacon Nathaniel and Elizabeth (Warner) Drake of East Windsor (Wapping). He married Martha Stedman in February, 1762. He is thought to have died in Paris, New York, soon after he moved there about 1803. So far, other sources have yielded little additional information.

Except that Ebenezer Drake sold a small part of Stony Hill to Frederick Mills in 1786, no records of his owning any quarry have been found. Two

of his brothers, however, appear to have been stonecutters. On August 1, 1766, Ebenezer Grant of East Windsor paid Silas Drake:

By Hewing 83 feet Stone @ 1/	4/3/0
By 4 Days work laying d° @ 4/	0/16/0

And Nathaniel Drake Jr., who is known to have owned a quarry, was paid:

Jan 28 1768 by 83 foot Stone at y^e^ Hill May 1766 @ 6^d^	2/1/6
May 19 1769 by 2 load Ruff Stone at y^e^ Hill	1/0/0

Ebenezer's gravestones came from at least two quarries. Most of them were made from a coarse, brick-red sandstone which was quarried in Wapping but many others were made from a darker, smoother, fine-grained stone which obviously came from a different quarry.

A few disturbing facts about the Drake gravestones remain to be explained. The estate of Ebenezer Bliss (East Windsor, 1776) disbursed:

To Cash pd Silas Drake for Tomb Stones	2/8/0
For fetching home sd Stones &c	0/6/0

Also, the estate of Joshua Pitkin (East Hartford, 1775) "Paid to Elisha Stanly for Grave Stones . . . 1/13/0." The Bliss and Pitkin gravestones are indistinguishable from others made by Ebenezer Drake. It seems likely, therefore, that Silas either acted as Ebenezer's agent or assisted him in making gravestones. Silas' name is also mentioned in the John Bliss estate (East Windsor, 1780), but there is no other evidence that he was in the gravestone business by himself. Elisha Stanley lived in East Hartford where he owned a shop and a sawmill. It is difficult to believe that he made the Pitkin gravestone for not only was the amount of money insufficient but also his probate papers fail to show any evidence that he was in the gravestone business.

Fig. 12

Ebenezer Drake was an astonishingly successful stone engraver. Beginning with a few stones crudely lettered and designed he became within ten or fifteen years the most popular stonecutter in Hartford County. At least one-half of all gravestones before 1800 in the South Windsor, Windsor and Bloomfield graveyards were made by him; they are common in towns nearby; and an occasional stone is to be seen in more distant towns such as Norfolk, Middletown, Colchester and Old Lyme. In Essex there are many of his stones for various members of the Hayden family. It is difficult to understand such popularity. Today we would much prefer Drake's simple primitives but in time his fantastic night-

mares were the rage. It all goes to prove that fashions in hats, automobiles or tombstones are beyond the ken of mortal man.

NEWS OF THE SOCIETY

A noticeable fundamental weakness in historical societies throughout the country is a scarcity of actively interested young people. Our Membership Committee has faced this problem for some years and finally, last spring, the Chairman invited a group of us to dinner to consider the matter. After much discussion, all were agreed on the method—Seminars—and the first subject—Antique Furniture. Letters describing the course were sent early in October, and announcement of the Seminar was made at the October meeting. Since membership in the Society was a requirement for registration, 63 new members were added to our rolls. In all, more than 80 persons have registered for the Seminar, exceeding the capacity of our Lecture Hall.

Paul Koda, cabinetmaker, is conducting the course which is scheduled for the third Tuesday in each month, October through April, with the exception of December. The sessions have been divided into materials, tools, study of styles (third and fourth sessions), refinishing and repair.

The success of this initial Seminar prompts the Society to make it an annual affair with added subjects as leaders can be located. Subjects under consideration include stencilling, bookbinding, care and treatment of prints and paintings, china and glass.

It is hoped that a series of Seminars, perhaps a different one meeting each week, will not only provide an unending source of new members, but will also awaken greater interest among our other members.

OUT-OF-PRINT ANNUAL REPORTS

We are always pleased when libraries bind our *Annual Reports*. This makes known to scholars everywhere acquisitions made by the Society. In recent months two requests have been received which we are unable to fill. If any member has copies of the report for 1944, 1948, 1949 and 1950, we should appreciate them so that the file at the University of Illinois may be completed. Also, reports for 1930, 1931, 1937-1945, 1947-1950 are needed at Cornell.

Recent issues of the *Bulletin* are also scarce, with volume 12, numbers 2 and 3, volume 13, number 1 and volume 14, numbers 3 and 4 out of print completely.

The late George E. Hoadley left to the Society the remainders of the *Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut* which his brother Charles J. Hoadly had edited. Volumes 1, 2 and 3 are out of print and occasionally we have requests for them. If any member has copies which are no longer needed, we should appreciate them in order to assist other libraries to complete their files of this valuable reference set.

The price of these Bulletins is ten cents each.